

**Family and Childcare Trust response
Ofsted consultation on *Inspecting childminder agencies*, March 2014**

About the Family and Childcare Trust

The Family and Childcare Trust works to make the UK a better place for families. Our vision is of a society where government, business and communities do all they can to support every family to thrive. Through our research, campaigning and practical support we are creating a more family friendly UK.

We welcome the opportunity to respond to this important consultation. For more information or any queries regarding our response, please contact Adam Butler, Policy Officer, on 0207 940 7531 or at adam@familyandchildcaretrust.org.

General comments

The childminder agency proposal represents a departure from the existing regulatory framework. For the first time since Ofsted became responsible for the registration and inspection of childcare, statutory responsibility for monitoring quality and enforcing standards in childcare will be delegated to a number of potentially diverse organisations. There is risk attached to this change for the quality of childcare delivered by childminders who choose to register with an agency. The Family and Childcare Trust believes Ofsted has an important role in minimising this risk.

It is important that, in relation to childminder agencies, the Chief Inspector fulfils the function set out in sections 31 and 81 of the Childcare Act 2006 to report annually to the Secretary of State (and publish this report) on:

(a) the contribution of regulated early years provision in England to the well-being of children for whom it is provided;

(b) the quality and standards of regulated early years provision in England;

(c) how far regulated early years provision in England meets the needs of the range of children for whom it is provided;

(d) the quality of leadership and management in connection with regulated early years provision in England.

In order to fulfil its obligations in relation to (a) and (c) particularly, Ofsted must be able to gather sufficient and adequate information on the quality of childcare delivered by childminders registered with a childminder agency.

As Ofsted officials will be aware, the government amended the Children and Families Bill (now Act) at a relatively late stage to place an obligation on Ofsted to assess the effectiveness of an agency's arrangements for assuring itself of the quality of the care and education provided by childminders registered with it. The Family and Childcare Trust proposed and advocated for this amendment. However, we remain concerned that the

agency proposals may lead to varying levels of transparency about the quality of care delivered by childminders themselves.

There is likely to be a lack of coherence and effectiveness to the role of agencies in monitoring quality unless agencies operate within a clear, evidence-based framework. It is particularly important that agencies use robust approaches to measuring quality that reflect the Early Years Foundation Stage framework, which childminders registered with an agency will be required to deliver, and produce transparent, easy to understand quality indicators of individual childminders for parents. It is difficult to find a compelling reason why quality indicators or grades should be different to those currently used by Ofsted, which provide credible and easily understood measures.

Ofsted has developed evidence-based inspection guidance built around the Early Years Foundation Stage and is ideally placed to prepare a guidance framework for agencies that supports them to effectively meet their quality assurance duties. The consistency of assessment produced by such a framework would in turn provide the evidence needed for Ofsted to meet its own statutory responsibility to monitor and report on the quality of childminder agency provision, alongside other early years provision, and its contribution to the needs of children.

Responses to consultation questions

Q1. To what extent do you agree or disagree that we should give no notice of inspection to childminder agencies?

Strongly agree.

No notice inspections are crucial in gaining an accurate picture of the standard of provision and we believe that childminder agencies should be subject to the same approach as other registered providers. No notice inspections are unlikely to cause any greater logistical problems for childminder agencies than they may for childminders and small nurseries and are proportionate to the statutory responsibilities of agencies.

Q2. To what extent do you agree or disagree that Ofsted should require inspectors to make an 'overall effectiveness' judgement on the overall quality of a childminder agency?

Strongly agree.

We agree that Ofsted should provide an overall effectiveness judgement for childminder agencies. The role the government has proposed for agencies is wide ranging, including for example monitoring and supporting quality, arranging training and providing brokerage and administrative support. Both parents and childminders will need to be able to make an informed comparison between different agencies. An overall inspection judgement reflects the holistic role of agencies, will support high standards and will assist parents and childminders in making like-for-like judgements about agencies.

Q3. To what extent do you agree or disagree that childminder agency inspection judgements should be made against this four-point scale?

Strongly agree.

It is crucial that all providers are subject to a consistent system of quality monitoring and enforcement. Polling suggests that the most common ways parents choose childcare providers are to visit settings, to talk to other parents and to check Ofsted ratings. Parents will presumably be likely to be able to interview agency childminders in most cases but, it also seems likely, will not always have the same ability to visit an agency and talk to its manager as they do with a nursery. Robust Ofsted assessments and quality measures that are clearly understood are crucial to parents' ability to make informed decisions about choosing childminders through an agency.

Q4. To what extent do you agree or disagree that Ofsted's inspections should take into account the agency's ability to use self-evaluation to improve their practice?

Strongly agree.

We agree that childminder agencies should be assessed against their ability to use self-evaluation to improve their practice. It is likely to be helpful to agencies and encourage good practice to have a model self-evaluation form similar to those currently published by Ofsted for other registered childcare providers.

Q5. To what extent do you agree or disagree that Ofsted should incorporate the views of individual childminders and parents involved with agencies into the inspection evidence to contribute to its inspection judgements?

Strongly agree.

We agree with the approach outlined by Ofsted and believe all childminders registered with an agency and parents using an agency childminder should be notified of an inspection and encouraged to provide their views on the service. It is important that Ofsted gathers the views of parents and childminders without risk that these views will be shared with the agency in a way that identifies those individuals. It would not be appropriate to put either childminders or parents in a position where negative feedback may compromise their relationship with the agency, and if this were the case it is unlikely feedback would be full and honest.

Q6. To what extent do you agree or disagree that childminder agency inspection reports should be published on the Ofsted website?

Strongly agree.

Polling of parents and our own focus groups suggest Ofsted grades and inspection reports are an important source of information on childcare for parents. Just as for other registered childcare providers, making Ofsted reports available will support parents to make informed choices about childcare and help to drive higher quality standards.